

Hearing on Sectarian Violence in Iraq and the Refugee Crisis: Testimony by Hon. Ellen R. Sauerbrey, Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration

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Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Commission, it is an honor to appear before you to discuss issues related to Iraqi refugees. What I want to do today is lay out what we have done, are doing and plan to do to protect vulnerable Iraqi refugees.

First, I want to give a baseline, and give a thumbnail sketch of where the Iraqi refugee situation is today. It is hard to get precise numbers in any refugee crisis, but it is estimated that slightly over four million Iraqis have been displaced from their homes.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees believes that of this number, roughly half, or two million, have left Iraq for other countries in the region. Half of the 165,000 who have registered with UNHCR have arrived in the past year.

Suddenly, Syria, Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon find themselves playing host to a huge influx of Iraqis. Many of these Iraqi refugees are in serious need of shelter, health care, and education for their children.

Among this population of refugees, of course - and of special interest to your commission - are many members of religious minority groups, including Assyrian and Chaldean Christians, Sabeans and Yazidis.

Many of the Iraqis who have registered with the UNHCR in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey identify themselves as Christian. It is remarkable, for example, that the percentage of Iraqi refugees who have arrived in the US for resettlement who are Christian is 62%. The situation of these refugees is especially tragic because of their long history in Iraq; many of these communities have been living in what is now Iraq for millennia.

Still, there is a lot of deliberation about whether religious minorities in Iraq have been targeted specifically because they are Christian or whether they are victims of overall sectarian violence. I must emphasize that the majority of displaced Iraqis are Sunni and Shia Muslims.

Whatever the religious affiliation of the displaced Iraqis, we are determined to help them, and have backed up our promises with robust programs in protection and resettlement.

The State Department bureau I head, the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, is involved in helping refugees and conflict victims all over the world. We do so through the United Nations, through the Red Cross, and through a network of respected American and international non-governmental organizations. We provide substantial funding to these groups, and monitor and evaluate how their programs benefit refugees and other vulnerable groups.

Our funding is in line with the longtime American approach to refugee assistance: our primary goal is to protect the refugees in the places where they have sought safety and to promote a political solution that will allow them to return to their home country.

The large-scale displacement of Iraqis began in May, 2006, after the bombing of the Samara mosque in February of that year. As public disorder increased, so did the number of Iraqis fleeing their homes. We are fully engaged in an effort to support the Iraqi government's political reconciliation process. Our top priority is a peaceful Iraq, in which citizens of all religions and ethnicities can live together free of sectarian violence and terrorism.

Only this kind of agreement, which will lead to a peaceful and multi-ethnic state, will allow Iraqis to rebuild their country. Only this kind of agreement will lead to an Iraq to which refugees can return safely, and voluntarily, in confidence that they and their families will be secure in the long term.

For now, however, many Iraqis still believe it is unsafe to return to Iraq. For this population we have been working hard to provide help

in the fields of education, health and emergency relief. In 2007 the U.S. government has made available nearly \$200 million to international organizations and non-governmental organizations, and other governments to relieve the suffering of Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons.

Let me give you some numbers that illustrate the scope and depth of our commitment. I will focus my remarks on assistance to refugees, but will mention some aspects of our work that also help internally displaced Iraqis.

This year, the United States has given \$37 million to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Special Iraq Appeal. The money raised by this appeal has been used to register over 165,000 Iraqis as refugees and to provide food and other assistance to 100,000 of this group. This money also funded UNHCR's assistance to 300,000 internally displaced people as well as to 45,000 non-Iraqi refugees who remain inside Iraq. No other country gave more to this appeal.

On my March trip to Syria and Jordan I was alarmed to find so many Iraqi kids were not attending school. This was a looming disaster for the future of Iraq. The United States government urged UNHCR and UNICEF to launch a joint education appeal and helped to persuade the government of Jordan to admit Iraqi students to its public schools.

On my recent trip to Turkey and Jordan I announced the first part of our contribution to that appeal, at a girls' school that has recently opened its doors fully to Iraqi students. Twenty percent of the student body is Iraqi and for some of these students it was the first time they were at school in two years. Our contribution to the appeal is now at \$39 million, and the money is enabling Jordanian and Syrian to expand, to hire extra teachers, and to set up specialized training programs.

Over 370,000 Iraqis in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon are being helped by the nearly \$19 million we have contributed to ten non-governmental organizations that provide health care, education and emergency humanitarian assistance to displaced Iraqi refugees in those countries.

Most of these groups have worked in the region a very long time, and have the expertise to get help to the refugees quickly. For instance, in Syria and Lebanon, Catholic Relief Services provide emergency humanitarian assistance to those in need: refugee families receive mattresses, blankets, clothes and heaters. In Syria, CRS and the International Catholic Migration Commission enable Iraqi refugees to

find and pay for medical treatment, and offer remedial education courses for Iraqi children.

Finally, the U.S. government has given over \$10 million directly to the Government of Jordan so it can reinforce ongoing health and education programs in communities that have seen a large wave of arrivals from Iraq. In this way schools, clinics and housing offices in Jordan are getting extra funding from us to pay for the large increase in their client or student base.

At our urging, UNHCR, our embassy and some designated NGOs are referring refugees to our admissions program. Resettlement is our option of last resort, the course we take when it is unlikely a refugee will be able to return safely to his or her home country even if conditions for others improve, and for whom integrating into host communities is not a possibility.

Many of the Iraqis whom we have resettled, or who are in the midst of being considered for resettlement, belong to especially vulnerable populations, such as religious minorities or former employees of the US government.

Resettlement is a complex process. Many U.S. government agencies play significant roles: the bureau I head and the Bureau of Consular Affairs in the Department of State, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Department of Health and Human Services. Outside the government, we work with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to ensure that we are considering the most suitable cases for resettlement.

We contract with international and non-governmental organizations such as the International Organization for Migration, or the International Catholic Migration Conference, to establish what are called Overseas Processing Entities. Staff of these organizations interview refugee applicants and prepare the necessary paperwork which is reviewed and used during the refugee case adjudication by officials from the Department of Homeland Security.

When I was in Jordan I sat through refugee interviews conducted by the Overseas Processing Entity in Amman, and another interview by the Department of Homeland Security. New, post-9/11 security concerns mean that the process takes longer than it used to. For example, each DHS interview in Jordan lasted for approximately four hours.

We work, at a diplomatic level, with the foreign governments in countries that are hosting Iraqi refugees. Finally, in the U.S. we work with our resettlement agency partners who help refugees adjust to life in the United States, and with the Department of Health and Human Services, which provides further assistance.

For the Iraqi refugee situation, when we began expanding access to resettlement this spring, we had to create the infrastructure from scratch. We had no refugee processing presence in Syria or in Jordan, the primary destination countries for Iraqi refugees. Likewise, the registration and referrals capacity of the small UNHCR offices in these countries needed to be expanded to deal with the increased demand.

Despite the challenges of rapidly establishing and launching the process in various locations, the U.S. has, to date, admitted 990 refugees this fiscal year and this number will increase considerably by the end of the month. Iraqi admissions in FY 2008 will be substantially higher.

One lesson we learned after 9/11 is that any program that allows people to enter our country must guard against terrorist infiltration. That's why we have acted to ensure the integrity of our refugee program by establishing a rigorous security vetting protocol. Those procedures help screen out potential security risks while at the same time offering sanctuary to Iraqi refugees who deserve our country's protection.

We are also dealing with external obstacles, such as the fact that Syria has refused to provide visas to DHS officials, who are necessary to enter Syria to conduct the necessary interviews with candidates for refugee resettlement. In some countries, getting exit visas for Iraqis who have arrived as refugees has been time-consuming.

Despite the challenges, we have a moral obligation to protect Iraqi refugees, particularly those who belong to persecuted religious minorities, as well as those who have worked closely with the United States government since the fall of Saddam Hussein. It is inspiring for me to visit refugee families who have resettled here in the U.S., and see how quickly they have adapted to their new surroundings. I plan to visit resettled Iraqis next month to monitor this aspect of our resettlement program.

Among the U.S. agencies providing services to refugees arriving in their new home are six faith-based groups, representing various Catholic, Protestant and Jewish organizations.

In closing, I would like to say that we are committed to helping refugees get the protection they need. We will continue to give generously to UN and other international and NGO efforts to help displaced Iraqis. The Administration's top priority, of course, remains promoting a more stable, and peaceful Iraq. Most of the Iraqi refugees I talk to want, most of all, to return home. We owe it to them to do everything we can to make that possible.